What Can Teachers Do to Get All Children Ready for Kindergarten?

Tips on Instructional Practice, Small Group, Individual Work Time, and Curriculum

Each teacher tip sheet offers insight into one aspect of evidence-based practice. The tips come from what we learned in our study, Assessment of Indiana’s Early Education Classrooms.

- Cross, A. F. (2013). Choose a Curriculum that is Effective.
Tip Sheets for Teachers: Practices to Promote School Readiness

How do Preschool Children Spend Their Time?

With the increased emphasis on academics in kindergarten, recent research has focused more explicitly on the types of learning experiences that impact prekindergarten children's academic skills. Although there are different descriptions and names given, there are typically five activities in a preschool day: free choice, routines, whole group, small group and individual work. Each of these classroom activities has a different degree of adult direction and interaction, providing children with varied amounts of instructional time.

Current research is suggesting that children who spend more time in classrooms that balance teacher directed activities such as small groups and individual instruction with free choice and whole-group times have greater opportunities to engage in teacher interactions and activities that support academic growth.

The Early Childhood Center research study found that children in Indiana spend on average:

- 35% of their time in free choice activities
- 28% of their time in whole group
- 12% in routines (standing in line, washing hands, etc.)
- 10% of their time in small groups and
- 10% of their time in individual instruction.

Research is suggesting that many children, particularly those who are at risk for school failure, need more focused, intentional instructional time, particularly on language and literacy skills. There are two important implications when we consider the way time is allocated.

First, it is critical that teachers make use of classroom time by engaging in high quality conversation and interactions with children during all activities and routines.

Second, a careful look at how time is spent might result in a more intentional balance of activities, with some time being reallocated from whole group and free choice. This allows teachers to focus on children's needs by creating more small group or individual instructional times.
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Talking to Make a Difference: What Kinds of Questions?

As teachers, we ask a lot of questions. What color is that? Did you hang up your coat? What do you have for lunch today? If we stop and listen to ourselves we may find that all our interactions with the children in our class are made up of questions.

Language is powerful. So are our interactions with children. Combined, we have an incredible opportunity to help children grow and learn just by asking thoughtful questions that pull children more deeply into topics and ideas.

Madison is playing in the sand, exploring measuring cups, pouring sand between different sized containers. We can ask questions with obvious answers: “Which one is bigger?” “Is it full or empty?” While these let us know where Madison’s understanding about quantitative concepts maybe it doesn’t further her thinking on the topic. Try questions like, “How did you make that happen?” “What would happen if…?” “How do you know?”

Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions, like the ones in Madison’s story, encourage children to:
· use sentences instead of answering either yes or no, or with single words
· provide more information
· elaborate with new ideas and details
· offer creative answers
· talk about emotions
· extend the conversation

Sometimes you need to ask a closed-ended question first, and then follow up with an open-ended question that provides the opportunity for expansion.
· “Have you ever been to the dentist?”
· “What was it like?”
· “How did you feel when you were done?”

Questions During Reading

Another wonderful time to expand thinking with open-ended questions is during story book reading.
· “Why do you think that happened?”
· “How do you think that made him feel?”
· “How would you feel if that happened to you?”

Pairing closed-ended with open-ended questions works here, too.
· Which animal in this book did you like best?
· Why did you like the rabbit the most?

Ask yourself the question: "Is this just a test question, or does it further the child's thinking on this topic?"
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Talking to Make a Difference: Conversations

Listen to yourself sometime when you are talking with the children in your class. Many of us spend our day either giving directions or asking questions. These are by necessity very short, to the point interactions.

Each one of us has a powerful teaching tool at our disposal, if we only use it:

**Conversations!**

Create activities that inspire conversation. Encourage engagement and stimulate discussion by providing books that have interesting topics, materials that involve children in new and innovative creations, activities.

Be accessible. Sit down in the science center. Join the art table. We need to be physically present in order to stimulate conversation. If we are constantly filling out paperwork, or preparing for the next activity, conversations can’t happen.

Listen. What are the children creating? What are they thinking about? What should you talk about with them?

Ask open-ended questions. Follow up on what the children are saying by asking questions that show you are genuinely interested in what they are saying.

Repeat and expand. Acknowledge the child’s comments by repeating what was said, then expand on it using more advanced language and new vocabulary.

Wait. Be sure to wait for a response! We often have so much to say that we forget to give the children the opportunity to think and respond.

**Talk about what you are doing.** Describe what you are doing and why. Provide the names of the objects and actions the children are seeing.

Talk about what the children are doing. Use this as a chance to expand the children’s language and vocabulary for activities or routines that they are involved with on a daily basis.

Be a good language model. Use full sentences that have interesting words which describe objects and actions. Encourage the children to use creative language and vocabulary that you have introduced.

Watch the directive language. A conversation is not the time to tell the children what they should be doing. It is the time to expand and elaborate on what they are saying, to introduce new ideas and vocabulary.

**Take the time!**

Have meaningful conversations with children!
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Using Small Groups in Preschool

Small group time is one of the activities in preschool that can most benefit a child's academic readiness for kindergarten. It is an opportunity for teachers to spend focused instructional time with small groups of students who need additional support in specific skill areas. Because preschoolers spend one-third of their time in free choice activities, it is an ideal time for teachers to pull together some small groups.

Small groups, by definition, allow teachers to create flexible groups based on children's needs and similar skill levels. This intentional grouping of children limits the diversity of need so that the teacher can focus her teaching to discrete, specific skills.

Small groups can be used to pre-teach concepts that may be needed for children to participate fully in upcoming whole-group activities, or as a time to reinforce ideas and skills with which the children may be struggling. Small group time is also ideal for teachers to assess where children are in their learning process.

Do not read paper and pencil tasks into this!

The key elements of small group instruction are:

- Flexible groups based on need
- Direct instruction
- Focused on discrete concepts or skills

This can be done in many fun and creative ways.

Not an either/or proposition

Free choice time is important for the development of creativity, collaboration, imagination, and persistence, just to name a few essential skills. However, research is suggesting that many children, particularly those who are at risk for school failure, need more focused, intentional instructional time, particularly language, literacy and math skills.
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Individual Work in Preschool

One of the activities in preschool that can most benefit a child's academic readiness for kindergarten entry is that of individual work. It is a time when teachers can provide individualized instruction for a child who needs additional support, assess a child's progress, or guide a child to work toward independence by applying and practicing skills learned earlier.

Let's be perfectly clear!

We are NOT talking about worksheets! There are many ways to prepare prekindergarten children to work independently without sitting them down at a table with worksheets.

What can you do?

- Plan individual work activities that have a variety of products. Use manipulatives, art projects, independent reading….all of these can help children gain the skills they need.

- Expand the number of times during the day that children are expected to engage in activities that are teacher planned, with clear tasks and products for children to complete. This is in contrast to the type of individual work that children may complete early in the year at the art center.

- Expand the amount of time children are expected to stay at each activity.

- Gradually increase the complexity of the tasks so that children have practice following multiple step directions that entail more complicated ideas.

- Gradually decrease the amount of guidance you provide so that children are working more independently.

- Expand the number of activities that include literacy and writing, since this is a big focus in kindergarten.

What do children need to be able to do?

Children need to be able to independently follow directions to complete a task with the materials provided. They need to be able to remain at this task for up to fifteen minutes, several times a day.
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A curriculum is a written document with specific goals, learning experiences, methods of instruction, and materials for implementation.

When we recently asked teachers for the name of the curriculum they used, more than 20% of the teachers in our study responded with the names of things that were not curricula. Research has shown that children have better outcomes when a teacher uses a curriculum rather than none (Chambers, Cheung, & Slavin, 2006).

A curriculum is a written document made up of several elements that together guide the teacher’s instruction. The National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (2012, June) lists these elements: (a) goals for children’s development and learning; (b) experiences through which children will achieve the goals; (c) roles for staff . . . to help children to achieve these goals; and (d) materials needed to support the implementation of a curriculum.

Specific goals
The goals focus your instruction on the most important skills and knowledge that children will need. An example of a specific math goal is: ‘Children identify the geometric shapes of circle, square, triangle, and rectangle’. Most often, the goals are to be achieved by the end of the school year. You know that the skills and knowledge need to be sequenced and reached in certain time periods so that children will be ready for success in kindergarten. The Reggio Emilia approach offers wonderful emergent learning experiences, but doesn’t have a specific set of goals, and so it is not a curriculum.

Learning experiences
A curriculum provides specific learning experiences to meet the goals in an organized, sequenced manner. If you are not using a curriculum, it is likely that the activities being planned are not introducing and supporting the acquisition of critical skills. The Foundations to the Indiana Academic Standards for Young Children presents what is to be learned, but it is not a curriculum because it doesn’t provide the learning experiences, methods of instruction, or materials needed for implementation.

Methods of instruction
Methods of instruction in a curriculum inform teachers about their roles in the teaching-learning process. For example, the teacher is to be the discussion leader, demonstrator, experiment participant, or other role. In addition, methods define the way to introduce an activity to children letting them know what they will learn. Methods also describe the instructional sequence of what things to emphasize and when in order to build children’s understanding.

Materials needed
Materials are included or defined by the curriculum to ensure that the teacher has what is needed to successfully implement the experiences and instruct the children. Such materials might be the picture, story, and nonfictional books to use or word and letter cards, as well as the types and quantities of manipulatives needed.

A well-designed curriculum has each of its parts synchronized with the others. The parts are aligned to ensure that children learn.
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What Is a Curriculum?

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Choose a Curriculum that is Effective

Research has shown that some curricula have a positive effect on children’s learning and our study found that there are teachers who do use effective curricula. But, there are also teachers using curricula that are ineffective. Some use curricula that have not been studied so we don’t know if the curricula work or not and some use documents that they think are curricula, but which are not. Could Indiana children be learning more?”

What teachers need is evidence that their curricula work. The best resource for finding that information is the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) provided by the Institute of Education Sciences. The WWC web address is http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/. This resource uses the most rigorous research to identify which curricula work, how well, and for what outcomes. The table below includes all of the curricula that the WWC found to be effective.

When it comes time for you to review the effectiveness of your current curriculum or make a new choice, you are faced with significant questions.

1. Are you using a written curriculum with specific goals, learning experiences, methods of instruction, and materials for implementation? These elements are needed to guide your teaching. Reggio is an approach to teaching rather than a curriculum. Information from The Foundations to the Indiana Academic Standards for Young Children from Birth to Age 5 states that it is not a curriculum (Indiana Department of Education and Family and Social Services Administration, 2012).

2. Does your current curriculum have evidence that it is effective? Go to the WWC and search for the curriculum you currently use. There you will be able to find out if the studies for your curriculum meet the WWC guidelines. If it has been studied and is effective, then you have a good situation. If the curriculum has not been studied or if it is not effective than you should consider choosing a different one.

3. What should you do if you are expected to use a comprehensive curriculum? Both Head Start and NAEYC have curriculum guidelines that recommend that curricula be evidence-based and comprehensive. The effective curricula identified by WWC are each content specific covering literacy and math. A comprehensive curriculum is one that addresses all content areas found in the Foundations. Unfortunately the curricula that are comprehensive are not effective.

We suggest that you add an effective curriculum to your comprehensive one. Children in the classes we studied spent 44% of their time on literacy and language learning. An effective language and literacy curriculum might provide the biggest impact for your children.

Table 1: All Curricula Shown by WWC to be Effective in Specific Outcome Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective in Improving School Readiness Skills</th>
<th>Mathematics achievement</th>
<th>Print knowledge</th>
<th>Oral language</th>
<th>Phonological processing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building Blocks for Math (SRA Real Math)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-K Mathematics</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doors to Discovery™</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HeadSprout® Early Reading</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Express</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The check marks do not indicate the expected amount of effect on the outcome areas.*
Tip Sheets for Teachers: Practices to Promote School Readiness

Choose a Curriculum that is Effective

We know that high quality early education represents one of the best investments that society can make for promoting successful educational outcomes for all children, but particularly for children who are at risk (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). Early education, if it is done well, can significantly erase or minimize the achievement gaps that exist for many of our children (Barnett, 2011; Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009). The evidence is so overwhelming, that 39 of this country’s 50 states have elected to provide public-funded prekindergarten for its preschoolers (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011). The most recent report published by the National Institute for Early Education Research, The State of Preschool 2011, estimates that these 39 states provided prekindergarten services for 28% of all 4-year olds in this country. Unfortunately, Indiana is not of those states. In the absence of funding and state leadership, Indiana preschoolers have to rely on a patchwork system of services that falls short of the needed capacity to serve children who need these services most (Indiana Education Roundtable, 2012).

In 2012, we initiated a study to investigate how well existing early education programs in Indiana were doing. We were interested in seeing how well our classrooms performed in relation to other states. We wanted to see how well our practices aligned with current research evidence documenting effective early education, and we were curious to see how well different programs in our state compared with one another. We sent out invitations to all Head Start programs, licensed child care centers and public school preschools in the state. Video-recorded observations were completed in 81 classrooms that were geographically and socio-economically representative: 28 licensed child care centers; 27 Head Start classrooms, and; 26 public school classrooms. We recorded only in-class, morning activities; and analyzed each observation using two tools; the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008), and the Emerging Academic Snapshot (EAS) (Ritchie, Howes, Kraft-Sayre, & Weiser, 2002).

The CLASS focuses on three broad domains of effective teacher-child interactions that characterize children’s classroom experiences: Emotional Support, Organizational Support, and Instructional Support. Emotional Support captures how teachers help children develop positive relationships, enjoyment in learning, comfort in the classroom, and appropriate levels of independence. Classroom Organization focuses on how well teachers manage the classroom to maximize learning and keep children engaged. The Instructional Support domain involves how teachers promote children’s thinking and problem solving, use feedback to deepen understanding, and help children develop more complex language skills. The Emerging Academic Snapshot measures the types and frequency of activities and instruction to which children are exposed. The types of activities recorded include common preschool activities such as free choice time, whole group time, basic routines, small group instruction, individual work time, and meal/snack times. It further looks at children’s exposure to various curricular areas, including aesthetics (art, music, dance), literacy/language, math, science, and social studies. Some teacher actions (instruction) are also included.

We hope that the information we gained from this study benefits both policy makers and classroom practitioners. For policy makers, our goal is to establish a comparative baseline of program quality from which clear directions and decisions can be made to enhance preschool services in Indiana. For practitioners, our hope is that the insights we made about the presence (and absence) of evidence-based early education practices can inform their decisions concerning classroom schedules, curricula, and teaching practices.

This series of tip sheets looks at some of the findings of our research in a quick, one-page format. More information, including a breakdown of the data and more detailed discussion can be found on the Early Childhood Center website.